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At least once a quarter, I report on the woolie business in shortgrass country, hoping to turn the contempt for sheepmen held by the hollow horn operators and the rest of the hard-hearted denizens of this cold old earth to compassion. We face so much foreign competition in lamb and wool that unless coyotes become so thick the packs attack ships and refrigerated rail cars full of Australian product, we are headed for extinction.

So my story begins as the first inning of the 1999 wool harvest opens at Goat Whiskers the Younger's Holiday Inn Ranch. To launch the season, Young Whiskers mustered a

roundup crew of a half-dozen adults and a sprinkling of children. Being an equal opportunity outfit, he recruited three mounted cowgirls, a fellow wearing a tropical shell hat for ground and saddlehorn work, a foreman driving a four-wheeler, and a Hispanic cook of the hot temperament of the skillet hand and the Latin race. (As I was to learn at the first coffee break of the day, *Buenos dias, señora*, was an outrageous insult to the English-speaking ranch cook.)

Whisker's shearing crew travels to all of the western sheep-raising states. Along with the nine shearers, I counted eight wool handlers and pen loaders of various degrees of talent, from expert wool pickers to broom and

shovel help. Using Whiskers' elevated ramp method styled after Australian and New Zealand herders, the captain claimed his men sheared up to 1500 head in a day. That's a phenomenal amount of sheep for nine men to shear compared to crews turning out less in several days of work.

Included in the Whiskers scene was a grader certified to be of Australian rank from the wool house in Mertzon. Tires on the trailers, four-wheelers, and pickups, parked in a row, were inflated to proper amount; horses tied outside the pens were shod all the way around. Fleeces rolled off the big ewes soft and white with few defects and no double-cut fibers to go in a bailer set at perfect pressure. And

all the while, Goat Whiskers and the shearing captain presided over this flawless operation in the way the grandest of Viennese maestros once mounted polished mahogany stages to wave ivory batons over the magnificence of the Austrian National Symphony.

Whiskers agreed to allow me to shear two pastures of ewes in his pens before the crew started on his hair goats. The water lot to his shearing corrals corners at the Southwest point of my outfit. It was a big favor to ask. He needed the goats peeled, but Whiskers is a softhearted soul and a good neighbor.

The big catch, or the *gigantic catch*, was that the domestic wool market is in the throes of a darkness so severe, should a light of hope big as the flicker of an exploded match head flash on the horizon, it'd look like a lightning bolt to us. The middle range of the new-era shearing job (sacks, bailing, grading, and shearing) costs about thirty cents a pound. Depending on the house, commission drags from six to ten cents a pound more off the price. The sheep and goat herder association dues take a small assessment. By the time such extras as labor and freight are added, the 40-odd cents a pound quoted for three-inch staple wool won't cover the harvest expense.

I realized this travesty was on Whiskers' mind when he agreed to stop everything except his overhead to allow me to shear a little bunch of sheep. On top of the trauma of a profitless shearing operation, he had stopped smoking. The drug he was taking was so powerful it not only made cigarettes taste bad but gave him leg cramps so severe, he was unable to slip off far enough from the house to sneak a smoke.

I might be partly to blame. At Christmas, I gave him and his friend Aunt Annie a book on American Indian customs. One chapter told how the squaws cut their captives' heel tendons to keep them from escaping. I was sure Aunt Annie

had read the book. I also knew she was determined to cure Whiskers of smoking at any cost. Further indictment was that she and the doctor prescribing this string halter remedy are thick as oatmeal cakes. If old Doc told her fitting a hackamore made of grape vines over Whiskers' head was going to stop him from smoking, Whiskers' might as well start hoping the skin the throat latch rubbed off behind his ears healed before fly time.

Every time Whiskers hobbled over to his pickup to look once more in the ash tray to see whether Aunt Annie might have missed a butt, I felt sorry for him. Coming off nicotine is a tough withdrawal without having to suffer

around a shearing crew. I just hope by next year the good doctor has found a way of curing Whiskers and myself of running sheep.